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DO CROSSES WALK AND TALK? A RECONSIDERATION OF *GOSPEL OF PETER* 10.39-42

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Abstract

There has been a recent upsurge in support for a conjectural emendation in the text of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39, 42. The proposed change suggests that instead of a moving and talking cross (σταυρόν), the text should be emended to refer to the crucified one (σταυρωθέντα). The motivation for the change is that as it stands the text 'is almost unbelievably absurd.' This paper seeks to rebut that suggestion on three levels. First, the proposed emendation introduces more problems than it solves. Secondly, elsewhere in the extant portion of the *Gospel of Peter* there are other indications that the author heightens miraculous elements, especially in relation to inanimate objects becoming animate. Thirdly, while the notion of a walking and talking cross may offend modern sensibilities, it is a plausible idea in its ancient context, and other texts from the period also contain descriptions of moving and articulate crosses.

I. INTRODUCTION

If there is one thing for which the *Gospel of Peter* is justifiably famous, it is surely the striking description in the resurrection scene of the cross following Jesus out of the tomb and speaking. In response to the divine question, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?' (*Gos. Pet.* 10.41), the cross answers with the single word, 'Yes.' (*Gos. Pet.* 10.42). This detail, totally absent in any form from the canonical gospels, is vivid, striking, and captivating. It may reflect an early or embryonic stage of the emergence of the so-called 'harrowing of hell' traditions.¹ However, what is certainly the case is that at least to modern sensibilities the description not only defies belief, but is also seen as so ludicrous that one may question whether even in the ancient world that such an incredible description could ever have been intentional.

The scepticism surrounding the integrity of this reading has a long pedigree in scholarly research into the *Gospel of Peter*. After the initial publication of the *editio princeps* of the text late in 1892,² there was a flurry of publications treating the text. As early as 1893, Harnack referred to a suggestion by H.H. Duhm that at this point the text was corrupt in its description of a moving and speaking cross, and the *Gospel of Peter* required emendation.³ Harnack described Duhm's proposal in the following way:

Sehr auffallend ist in v. 42, dass die Antwort „ἀπὸ τοῦ σταυροῦ“ und nicht von dem verkärten Gekreuzigten selbst erfolgt, und ebenso auffallend sind (v. 39c) die Worte: καὶ σταυρόν ἀκολοθοῦντα αὐτοῖς. Duhm, ein hebräisches Original annehmend, vermuthet,

¹ For fuller discussion of the possibility that this scene is part of an early 'harrowing of hell' tradition see P. Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, TENT 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2010) 424-431.

² U. Bouriant, 'Fragments du texte grec du livre d'Énoch et de quelques écrits attribués à saint Pierre', dans *Mémoires publiés par les membres de la Mission archéologique française au Caire* (t. IX, fasc. 1; Paris: Ernest Leroux 1892) 93-147.

³ A. Harnack, *Bruchstücke des Evangeliums und der Apokalypse des Petrus* (TU IX, 2, J. C. Hinrichs: Leipzig 1893) 70.

dass der Übersetzer בולע, das sowohl „Kreuz“ wie „Gekreuzigter“ bedeuten kann, falsch verstanden hat, und dass zu übersetzen ist v. 39: „sie sahen, wie drei Männer aus dem Grabe hervorkamen, und die zwei den einen aufrichteten und der Gekreuzigte ihnen folgte“ und v. 42: „und Antwort wurde gehört von dem Gekreuzigten: Ja“ (dazu die Bemerkung Duhms: „Ich habe allerdings das erste Mal zu dem ‘צ den Artikel hinzugefügt, den der Grieche vermuthlich desswegen wegliess, weil er ‘צ als σταυρός verstand und das Kreuz in diesem Zusammenhang ja eine noch nicht vorgestellte Grösse war. Bei einem aramäischen Urtext wäre die Sache noch einfacher“). Gegen diese scharfsinnige Vermuthung spricht, dass die Worte „der Gekreuzigte folgte den beiden anderen“ nicht passend erscheinen.⁴

Perhaps the most fundamental problem with this argument as it stands is the assumption that there existed either a Hebrew or Aramaic ‘original’ behind the Greek text of the *Gospel of Peter*. For those who believe the text to be literarily dependent on the canonical gospels,⁵ the question concerning the language in which the text was written is a *non sequitur*. The language of the extant fragment is also the language of composition, which like the canonical gospels it borrows from was composed in Greek.⁶ Also, among those who argue for the priority of the *Gospel of Peter* over the canonical accounts, the language of composition is either assumed or implied to be Greek. For instance, Crossan takes this as given when he discusses the Greek vocabulary of his hypothetical *Cross Gospel* source.⁷ Apart from being the dominant scholarly viewpoint, a Greek original is supported in other ways. Since the discovery of the Akhmîm Codex containing the *Gospel of Peter*, a much earlier fragment containing some overlapping material with *Gos. Pet.* 2.3-5 has been published.⁸ This appears to suggest that the shared tradition circulated in Greek at least by the third century. Perhaps more importantly, the extant portion of the *Gospel of Peter* seems to contain a lower proportion of Semitisms than the canonical gospels, which were composed in Greek. This implausible aspect of the theory suggested by Duhm, but modified and presented by Harnack may account for its virtual neglect in subsequent scholarship.

More recently, however, Mark Goodacre has once again taken up the theory that the text of the *Gospel of Peter* originally read ‘the crucified one’ rather than ‘the cross’ in *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42.⁹ Goodacre’s version of the hypothesis is far more robust, since it avoids the unnecessary and almost certainly erroneous supposition that the text was originally written in a Semitic language. Goodacre presents his idea in the following form:

The idea of a walking, talking cross is almost unbelievably absurd, all the more so given the lack of precedent for it in the text, in which the cross was earlier completely

⁴ Harnack, *Bruchstücke des Evangeliums und der Apokalypse des Petrus*, 70.

⁵ Despite challenges to the notion that the *Gospel of Peter* is dependent upon the canonical gospels, this remains the dominant theory. Among others who support this theory see L. Vaganay, *L’Évangile de Pierre*, Études Biblique (Paris: Gabalda, 1st ed. 1929/2nd ed. 1930); R.E. Brown, ‘The Gospel of Peter and Canonical Gospel Priority’, *NTS* 33 (1987) 321-343.

⁶ See Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, 173.

⁷ J.D. Crossan, *The Cross that Spoke: The Origins of the Passion Narrative* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 27.

⁸ R.A. Coles, ‘2949. Fragments of an Apocryphal Gospel(?)’, in G.M. Browne (ed.), *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, vol. 41 (Cambridge: CUP, 1972), 15-16.

⁹ Goodacre’s idea was initially presented on his NT Blog: <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html> (Monday, October 18, 2010). Subsequently he presented his ideas in a more developed form at the International Society of Biblical Literature meeting, London, Monday, June 6, 2011, in a paper entitled, ‘A Walking, Talking Cross or the Walking Talking Crucified One? A Conjectural Emendation in the Gospel of Peter 10.39, 42’.

inanimate, and did not enter the tomb with Jesus at burial. One of the difficulties with the Gospel of Peter is that the only major textual witness (P.Cair. 10759) is late (eighth century), unreliable and riddled with errors, including many in this passage. And so I have begun to wonder whether there might have been another error in the scribe's transcription of his text here. **My suggestion is that we conjecturally emend the text from σταυρόν to σταυρωθέντα, from "cross" to "crucified"**, so that it is no longer a wooden cross that comes bouncing out of the tomb but rather Jesus, the "crucified one" himself.¹⁰

From the responses Goodacre provides to online comments, it appears that he developed his idea independently of the Duhm-Harnack version of this theory. His theory is more straightforward, in that it proposes a corruption occurred in the transmission of the Greek text, and the original reading σταυρωθέντα was altered to σταυρόν because of a scribal blunder. Given the comments he makes about the scribe responsible for the Akhmîm Codex (P.Cair. 10759), it may be the case that Goodacre also thinks that this manuscript is the stage at which the aberrant reading entered the textual tradition of the *Gospel of Peter*. However, that claim, which he does not make explicitly, is not necessary for his overall thesis, but may be an interesting corollary of it.

Goodacre's argument stands or falls on the plausibility of three necessary factors. First, does the text suggest that a conjectural emendation is necessary at this point (*Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42)? Secondly, is the notion of the cross becoming animate and articulate implausible in the wider context of the surviving portion of the *Gospel of Peter*? Thirdly, while the vision of a walking talking, talking cross offends modern post-Enlightenment sensibilities, is such an idea possible or even plausible in the ancient context in which the text circulated? It is to this series of three questions that the discussion now turns.

II. THE NECESSITY FOR A CONJECTURAL EMENDATION?

In his study on conjectural emendations of the New Testament text proposed by Erasmus and Beza, Jan Krans discusses cases where critics 'go beyond what is written' by suggesting a conjecture. Consequently he offers the following definition of the term:

Such conjectures can be defined as *readings not attested in the manuscript transmission, which are proposed and argued for by a critic with the intention of restoring a lost text* (usually, in the case of the New Testament, identified as the first publication of the Greek text of a given book).¹¹

Krans appears to avoid the complex discussion concerning the term 'original text' by his use of the phrase 'first publication', which may be simply a circumlocution for the more familiar but now highly contested terminology.¹² It is usually the case that recourse to postulating a conjectural emendation is seen as a last resort, when all the variant readings in a given variation unit are deemed to be corrupt or nonsensical. The situation is somewhat different in the case of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42, where this passage survives only in a single manuscript. This contrasts with the wealth of textual witnesses to the New Testament. The sheer volume of New Testament manuscripts has led Epp to suggest that

¹⁰ The only modification of Goodacre's online quotation has been the addition of accents to the Greek words. See <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html>.

¹¹ J. Krans, *Beyond What Is Written: Erasmus and Beza's Conjectural Critics of the New Testament*, NTTS 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2006) 1.

¹² For instance see E.J. Epp, 'The Multivalence of the Term "Original Text" in New Testament Textual Criticism', *HTR* 92 (1999) 245-281.

we may reasonably assume that somewhere among the estimated 300,000 variant readings reside virtually all of the original readings. Thus the necessity for conjectural emendation is almost entirely ruled out.¹³

While this assessment may be in itself over-confident,¹⁴ it certainly highlights why it may be more appropriate to posit a conjectural emendation for a text that is only attested by a single manuscript. The proposed emendation, if it is to gain support, must first demonstrate that the surviving reading in the given variation unit is unsatisfactory. Furthermore, it must then show that the proposed hypothetical reading is not anachronistic and results in a textual form that is sensible and does not clash with the wider context of the pericope.

The first thing to be said in favour of Goodacre's proposal to change the reading of σταυρόν in the manuscript to the term σταυρωθέντα, is that such an alteration is plausible in terms of the vocabulary used in the text. During the scene where the women visit the tomb on Easter morning, they meet a young man sitting at the entrance wearing a luminescent robe. He asks them a series of questions: 'Why did you come? Whom do you seek? Not that one who was crucified?' (*Gos. Pet.* 13.56). The final question in that series, μὴ τὸν σταυρωθέντα ἐκείνον; uses the term that Goodacre suggests was the original reading, in place of σταυρόν. Therefore, it can be shown not only that the term σταυρωθέντα was in use in the wider linguistic world when the first text in the Akhmîm Codex was copied by its scribe, but that it was a word with the scribe was familiar and comfortable. It is also likely to be the case that the term σταυρωθέντα was not introduced into the text by the scribe in the location of *Gos. Pet.* 13.56 in this particular manuscript, but was in fact the original reading.¹⁵ Hence in terms of the validity of the conjectural emendation, the lexical item that is being suggested as the correct reading is, at the very least, a plausible choice.

A second attendant issue is whether the proposed change results in a smoother and obviously less problematic text. At one level, the answer is certainly in the affirmative especially to modern ears – people walk and talk, crosses do not. So replacing the reference to 'the cross', with a reference to 'the crucified one', results in a human rather than a usually inanimate object being the item designated by verb of self-propelled motion and auditory perception, ἀκολοθοῦντα (*Gos. Pet.* 10.39), ἤκουετο (*Gos. Pet.* 10.42). Consequently, adopting the proposed conjectural emendation results in the following translation being offered by Goodacre:

And while they were narrating what they had seen, they saw three men come out from the sepulchre, two of them raising up the one, and the crucified one following them (40) and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was being led out by the hand by them reaching beyond the heavens. 41. And they heard a voice out of the

¹³ E.J. Epp, 'The International Greek New Testament Project: Motivation and History', in S.E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*, NTTS 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1997) 52-53.

¹⁴ For an alternative perspective see J. Delobel, 'Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Siamese Twins?' in B. Aland and J. Delobel (eds.), *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis and Early Church History: A Discussion of Methods*, CBET 7 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994); and M.W. Holmes, 'Reasoned Eclecticism in New Testament Textual Criticism', in B.D. Ehrman and M.W. Holmes (eds.), *Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Essays on the Status Quaestionis*, SD 46 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) 347-349.

¹⁵ It does need to be acknowledged that the end of this verse (*Gos. Pet.* 13.56) is the most difficult section of the manuscript. There are a whole series of problems here, with the scribe crossing out sections of the text and rewriting them. Discerning palaeographical analysis is needed at this point (although perhaps not conjectural emendation!). However the opening part of the verse that contains the word σταυρωθέντα is secure. For further details see Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, 481-485.

heavens crying, 'Have you preached to those who sleep?', 42. And from the crucified one there was heard the answer, 'Yes.'¹⁶

There is another important translational decision that is contained in this rendering of the Greek. Goodacre mentions this, but despite this the decision to make the conjectural emendation appears to introduce an even larger narrative-continuity problem into the text.

The difficulty with the proposed conjectural emendation arises from the phrase καὶ τοὺς δύο τῶν ἑνα ὑπορθοῦντας (*Gos. Pet.* 10.39). Among English translators this has been rendered in the following ways: 'and the two supporting the one';¹⁷ 'two of them supporting the other';¹⁸ 'and two of them were supporting the third';¹⁹ or 'and the two were supporting the one.'²⁰ In French, Vaganay provided the following translation: 'les deux (jeunes gens) soutenait l'autre';²¹ similarly in German Kraus and Nicklas offer: 'und die zwei den einen stützen'.²² While modern translations in a range of languages take the sense of ὑπορθοῦντας to be that of 'support', rather the one off action of 'raising up' the crucified one, there is the possibility that these translational decisions could be interrelated, and might not reflect the full range of semantic possibilities for the Greek term. Most commentators note that the Greek verb ὑπορθόω is extremely rare.²³ The full entry in BDAG for this term is as follows, 'ὑπορθόω (Sym.; Dositheus, *Ars Gramm.* 76, 1 p. 102) to assist in standing upright, *support* τινά *someone* G¹ 10:39.'²⁴ Under the headword ὑπορθος LSJ gives the following meanings and references '—όω *prop up, support*, Sm.Ps. 43(44).19, Sch.D Od. 8.66, Dosithe. p. 435K.'²⁵ While the evidential base is limited, the sense pertains to assisting a person who might not otherwise be able to support himself. No examples can be found in connection of raising somebody from the dead, or from a slumbering condition. Instead, the sense is that of acting as a prop or support. If that is the case, it appears unlikely that the text can envisage that after raising up the Lord, the two men walk ahead of him forming some kind of vanguard. Rather, their role is that of providing ongoing physical support to the newly risen Jesus.

Given that this interpretation is the most plausible way to understand the description intended by the participle ὑπορθοῦντας, Goodacre's explanation becomes increasingly problematic. If the two men are involved in propping up the risen Lord as he walks forth from the tomb, it is hard to envisage, if he is being described as the crucified one, how he can simultaneously be walking forth from the tomb behind the

¹⁶ Goodacre, <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html> (Monday, October 18, 2010).

¹⁷ J.A. Robinson, & M.R. James, *The Gospel according to Peter, and the Revelation of Peter: Two Lectures on the Newly Recovered Fragments together with the Greek Texts* (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1892) 24.

¹⁸ H.B. Swete, *The Apocryphal Gospel of Peter: The Greek Text of the Newly Discovered Fragment* (2nd ed.; Macmillan London, 1893) 27.

¹⁹ The reference to the 'third' is a very free-rendering of the sense and is not supported by a translation of the Greek which is guided by a more exact rendering rather than the principle of dynamic equivalence. J.R. Harris, *A Popular Account of the Newly Recovered Gospel of St Peter* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1893) 51.

²⁰ Foster, *The Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary*, 203.

²¹ L. Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, Études Biblique (Paris: Gabalda, 1st ed. 1929/2nd ed. 1930) 299.

²² T.J. Kraus & T. Nicklas, (eds.) *Das Evangelium nach Petrus: Text, Kontexte, Intertexte* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007) 43.

²³ See Vaganay, *L'Évangile de Pierre*, 297.

²⁴ BDAG, 1040.

²⁵ LSJ, 1893.

group of three. Admittedly, there are a number of early Christian texts that present Jesus as a polymorphic figure. While some speak of him appearing in a changed or metamorphised state, others envisaged an actual polymorphic change where Jesus appears simultaneously in multiple states.²⁶ However, there are no clues in the extant portion of the *Gospel of Peter* that the Lord is viewed as a polymorphous being. That being the case, in this scene it does not appear possible to envisage the ‘crucified one’ following the two men out of the tomb, since they are depicted as simultaneously supporting him. The only way to hold on to Goodacre’s proposed conjectural emendation would be to suggest that the text has become confused at this point, and has editorially fatigued in its description of the Lord being led forth between two men, only to immediately have him also following the three person resurrection party.²⁷ However, it is probably fair to suggest that if a conjectural emendation introduces greater textual difficulties than it resolves, perhaps it is best not to be adopted.

III. RELATED MIRACULOUS PHENOMENA IN THE *GOSPEL OF PETER*

Underlying the desire to emend the text of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42 is the assumption that the original author would not have envisaged the bizarre scene in which an inanimate object, such as the cross, becomes both mobile and articulate. From a modern perspective, one would be correct to share such concerns especially in relation to judging the historical likelihood of the events described. However, two points must be remembered. First the text is not modern, but an ancient composition, and secondly, defending the originality of the traditional meaning is in no way a defence of its historical veracity. The question is purely textual, and seeks to determine whether the author of the *Gospel of Peter* intended to present readers with the image of animate and vocal cross.

One of the key concerns of the *Gospel of Peter* is that of heightening or providing additional miraculous elements in the passion and resurrection narrative as a means of commending belief.²⁸ One area where this is particularly prominent is where inanimate objects respond to the momentous events that are taking place by miraculously becoming animate. The first example of this phenomenon is to be seen when the body of the dead Jesus is laid on the ground. The text describes the scene in the following manner:

kai. to,te avpe,span tou.j h[louj avpo. tw/n
ceirw,n tou/ kuri,ou kai. e;qhkan auvto.n evpi.
th/j gh/j\ kai. h` gh/ pa/sa evsei,sqh kai.
fo,boj me,gaj evge,neto (*Gos. Pet.* 6.21).

And then they drew the nails from the hands of the Lord and placed him on the earth, and all the earth was shaken and there was great fear. (*Gos. Pet.* 6.21).

This tradition may be loosely based upon the Matthean description of a post-crucifixion earthquake. However, whereas Matthew simply includes it as one member of the triad of additional phenomena that accompany the death of Jesus, the earth being shaken, the rocks being split, and the tombs being opened (Matt 27.51b-53), the

²⁶ For a discussion of the phenomena of polymorphic appearances of Jesus in early Christianity see P. Foster, ‘Polymorphic Christology: Its Origin and Development in Early Christianity’, *JTS* 58 (2007) 1-34.

²⁷ On the phenomenon of editorial fatigue see M.D. Goodacre, ‘Fatigue in the Synoptics’, *NTS* 44 (1998) 45-58.

²⁸ P. Foster, ‘Passion Traditions in the Gospel of Peter’, in T. Nicklas, A. Merkt und J. Verheyden (eds.), *Gelitten Gestorben Auferstanden*, WUNT 2.273 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 47-68; here 67.

Gospel of Peter develops the first element to a greater degree. While the wording of the earthquake phenomenon is close to the Matthean formulation *kai. h` gh/ evsei, sqh* (Matt 27.51b), differing only by the addition of the adjective *pa/ sa*, the preamble explains the cause of the quaking earth. There is an almost folkloric quality to the way in which the *Gospel of Peter* develops this tradition.²⁹ For the first evangelist the series of signs (including the Markan torn curtain) are seen as key eschatological events, which in the Matthean narrative have been collapsed into the story's 'historical present' to reveal the significance of Jesus' death. However, perhaps with less theological sophistication, the *Gospel of Peter* affirms the sanctity (if not the divinity) of the body placed on the ground by having the earth shake. Therefore, in the mindset of the author of the *Gospel of Peter* even the inanimate world trembles in recognition of the significance of what has taken place, whereas those who have carried out the execution are blind to the significance of their actions.

The second example is perhaps even more compelling. When the two men from heaven descend and approach the tomb, the narrative states 'that stone which had been placed at the entrance rolled away by itself' *avfV e`autou/ kulisqei, j* (*Gos. Pet.* 9.37). Since this passage links directly to the following scene, where the proposed conjectural emendation occurs, getting a sense of the cosmological view that forms the perspective of these two linked pericope is important. The trope of self-opening doors or entrances is not part of the synoptic tradition concerning the tomb of Jesus. In Mark the stone is discovered to have been rolled away (Mk 16.4), in Matthew an angel of the Lord descends and rolls the stone away (Matt 28.2), and Luke follows Mark with the women discovering the open tomb (Lk 24.2). Luz suggests that the redactional change in the Matthean narrative is of importance to the evangelist because it demonstrates that 'in the resurrection of Jesus God himself acted with clear, visible and traceable consequences.'³⁰ The *Gospel of Peter* appears to be on this same trajectory, and perhaps at a more advanced stage. Hence, the automated rolling away of the stone speaks even more vividly of divine agency. Whether this is an example of inanimate objects 'yielding' to divine will, or whether the stone should be seen as more independently 'responding' to the enormity of events, cannot be determined with any certainty from the text of the *Gospel of Peter* itself. While stories of self-opening doors are common in both ancient Jewish and Hellenistic literature,³¹ perhaps the closest parallel is found in Acts 12.10. Here an angel is also part of the scene, but does not physically open the outer gate of the story. Instead the gate opens automatically as the angel and Peter approach, *h[ti j auvtoma, th hvnoi, gh auvtoi, j* (Acts 12.10).

Similarly, the *Gospel of Peter* is composed in a mythical world where there is no difficulty in conceiving of inanimate objects becoming animate under influence from otherworldly powers. Not only are these phenomena found in the wider textual world of which the *Gospel of Peter* is part, they are also integral to the *Gospel of Peter* itself with the story of the shaking earth, the stone that rolls away by itself, and also (if a conjectural emendation is not warranted) in the description of a moving and speaking cross. While the two examples contained in the text show that the author is able to envisage inanimate objects moving, it needs to be acknowledged that in neither of these cases does the object speak. This is an important difference.

²⁹ See R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (2 vols, ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994) vol. 2, 1118.

³⁰ U. Luz, *Matthew 21-28*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 595-596.

³¹ For instance see, Homer, *Iliad* 5.747; Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.81; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.699-700; Tacitus, *Hist.* V.13; Dio Cassius, 60.35.1; Josephus, *Bell.* 6.293; *b.Yoma* 39b; *y.Yoma* 43c.

Furthermore, both the description of earthquake and the stone that has rolled away have some related antecedent in the synoptic tradition. By contrast, it must be squarely acknowledged that a cross that emerges from the tomb and speaks is a highly creative embellishment to the canonical tradition. Therefore, one is left to address the basic claim that a cross that walks and talks is such a bizarre concept in antiquity that for this reason alone one is forced to adopt a conjectural emendation.

IV. CROSS PIETY IN ANTIQUITY

Within the canonical gospels there are remarkably few references to the term σταυρός. The term occurs in both the Markan (Mk 8.34/Matt 16.24/Lk 9.23) and Q versions of the cross saying (Matt 10.38/Lk 14.27), as well as three times in the Matthean passion narrative (Matt 27.32, 40, 42), three times in Mark's passion (Mk 15.21, 30, 32), once in Luke's passion (Lk 23.26), and four times in the Johannine passion narrative (19.17, 19, 25, 31). In each of these instances the reference is to the implement of execution,³² and the cross remains inanimate and silent throughout each of these passages.

In the post-NT period there is a greater degree of theological reflection on the cross as a salvific object. For instance, probably writing some time in the first third of the second century, Ignatius describes the cross as a crane that lifts believers to the heights as part of God's temple (Ign, *Eph.* 9.1). In even more elevated and hymnic language in the *Acts of Peter*, the eponymous apostle of the text approaches the cross which is to be the implement of his execution and says 'O name of the cross, thou hidden mystery! O grace ineffable that is pronounced in the name of the cross!' (*Acts of Peter* 37.1). One of Goodacre's criticisms of the text of the *Gospel of Peter* as it is presented in the Akhmîm Codex is that it fails to explain how the cross came to be in the tomb with Jesus. He states in strong terms that, '[t]he idea of a walking, talking cross is almost unbelievably absurd, all the more so given the lack of precedent for it in the text, in which the cross was earlier completely inanimate, and did not enter the tomb with Jesus at burial.'³³ However, unpredictable elements are often features of apocryphal texts, and some of these unpredictable elements even involve the cross. In the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, only the body of Jesus is reported to have been interred in the grave (*Gos. Nic.* 5). However, contained in the description of the harrowing of hell is the following description that gives a prominent role to a previously unannounced cross in the victory over Hades.

Then all the saints of God asked the Lord to leave as a sign of victory the sign of his holy cross in the underworld that its most impious officers might not retain as an offender any one whom the Lord had absolved. And so it was done. And the Lord set his cross in the midst of Hades and it is the sign of victory which will remain to eternity.' (*Gos. Nic.* 10(26).1, Latin B).³⁴

This text provides a further example of a previously unmentioned cross making a startling appearance. That appearance occurs in another cycle of stories that narrate the death and resurrection of Christ. This reflects the increased prominence of the cross in Christian texts from the second century onwards, and also shows that such

³² For a detailed discussion concerning the variety of execution techniques that are designated by the term 'crucifixion' in antiquity see G. Samuelsson, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, WUNT 2.310 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

³³ Goodacre, <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html> (Monday, October 18, 2010).

³⁴ This translation is taken from J.K. Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford: OUP, 1993, rev. ed. 1999) 203.

narratives often employ the device of surprise, by having the cross turn up unexpectedly without prior indication of the means by which it came to be at the location depicted by the story. This text also reveals that having the cross present during the ‘harrowing of hell’ is not quite as anomalous as Goodacre imagines. He states, ‘some thought should be given to the motif of the “harrowing of hell”. It is quite anomalous that it is the cross that has apparently has been preaching to those who have fallen asleep.’ Furthermore, he argues against the cross’s presence in Hades, stating, ‘[i]f, on the other hand, the cross is involved in one key stage of this cosmic drama, looking like an afterthought, the result is bathos.’³⁵ First, the text of the *Gospel of Peter* does not say that the cross has been preaching to those who were asleep. Rather the impression is that the cross is speaking on behalf of the risen Lord, and affirming that he preached to those who were asleep. That is perhaps why the text stresses that ‘a response was heard from the cross’ (*Gos. Pet.* 10.42), precisely because the cross was not the figure to whom the question was being directed.

Another description of an unexpected appearance of the cross occurs in the *Acts of Philip*. In this text, because of a misdemeanor committed by Philip in cursing those who have done him evil, both Philip and those cursed by him are subjected to judgment. While the evildoers are cast down into Hades alive, Philip is also told that because he repaid evil for evil that ‘he will be shut outside of paradise for forty days’ (*Acts of Philip*, Martyrdom 31).³⁶ As the narrative unfolds ‘the Saviour’ rescues the evildoers from the abyss, enabling them to climb out of Hades on a luminous cross that takes the form of a ladder (*Acts of Philip*, Martyrdom 32).³⁷ When Philip is reintegrated back into the narrative and views the rescued multitude of former evildoers he declares ‘O you who have come up out of the dead from Hades, and the swallowing up of the abyss, – and the luminous cross led you up on high’ (*Acts of Philip*, Martyrdom 35). Here is a further example where the cross is associated with the realm of the dead, and moreover the text attributes to the cross the function of leading forth the multitude from Hades.

While this reveals the association of the cross with Hades in several early Christian texts, it presumably still leaves those who call for a conjectural emendation of the text of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42 unsatisfied. While the *Acts of Philip* might suggest the picture of a mobile cross, the language is still somewhat metaphorical. The text does reveal that bizarre details (at least as judged by modern sensibilities) may not have been so out of place in pious writings from antiquity. However, the key claim made by Goodacre was that a ‘walking, talking cross is almost unbelievably absurd.’³⁸ It is necessary at this point to consider a text that is often overlooked in the secondary literature. M.R. James, drawing upon the eleventh-century manuscript Codex Baroccianus 180, published an interesting supplement which stands as the conclusion to the *Acts of Philip* in this manuscript of the text. Here, as James noted,

³⁵ Goodacre, ‘A Walking, Talking Cross or the Walking Talking Crucified One? A Conjectural Emendation in the Gospel of Peter 10.39, 42’, unpublished SBL paper.

³⁶ The Greek text on which the English translation is based is F. Bovon, B. Bouvier & F. Amsler (eds.), *Acta Philippi: vol. 1 Textus*, CCSA 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999) see 395-410.

³⁷ Bovon comments, ‘Le Sauveur invite les engouffrés vifs à remonter en utilisant les échelons de la croix. F. Bovon, “Les Actes de Philippe”, in W Haase (ed.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, Teil II: Principat, Band 25.6, Religion (Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Leben und Umwelt Jesu; Neues Testament [Kanonische Schriften und Apokryhen], Schluss) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988) 4431-4527, here 4517.

³⁸ Goodacre, <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html> (Monday, October 18, 2010).

‘we have an apparition of a cross which accompanies the glorified Philip.’³⁹ The text reads as follows:

καὶ πολλαὶ φωναὶ ἤχησαν ἐν οὐρανοῖς τὸ Ἀμήν καὶ τὸ Ἀλληλουῖα. καὶ ἀνελήμφθη ὁ σταυρὸς καὶ ἐλάλησεν τῷ Φιλίππῳ· Ἴδοὺ ὁ τόπος τῆς καταπαύσεώς σου ἕως ἔλθω ἐν τῇ δόξῃ τοῦ πατρὸς μου, καὶ ἐξυπνίσω σε· ἀπόλαβε δὲ νῦν τὸν στέφανον τῆς ἀποστολῆς σου ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς, ὅπου εἰμι ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ τοῦ πατρὸς μου καθεζόμενος.

And many voices in heaven sounded the Amen and Allelulia. And the cross was taken up and spoke with Philip, ‘Behold the place of your rest until I come in the glory of my Father and awake you. And now receive the crown of your apostleship in the heavens, where I am sitting at the right hand of my Father.’⁴⁰

It is true that here one finds coalescence between the identity of the cross and that of the Son. The cross declares that it is sitting at the right hand of the Father, which is the location of the exalted Christ. While such overlapping identities are commonplace in such visionary texts, there is no doubt that the author of this portion of the *Acts of Philip* has little difficulty envisaging a talking cross, which declares it will come to awake Philip at the right time. Of course this may be considered another bizarre text, and one may not want to disagree with that assessment! However, what it does reveal is that the trope of a mobile, talking cross was not as strange in the ancient world as it may seem to modern readers. Perhaps we do well to bear in mind the famous dictum from the opening line of L.P. Hartley’s book *The Go-Between*: ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.’⁴¹

V. CONCLUSION: DO CROSSES WALK AND TALK?

This discussion has attempted to respond to the suggestion that has been gaining growing support on websites, discussion lists, and through conference papers, namely that the text of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42 requires emendation.⁴² The motivation for the proposed conjectural emendation is that as it stands, the text of *Gos. Pet.* 10.39-42 is absurd. Hence the suggestion that a conjectural correction should be adopted at this point in the text: with the suggested change being the alteration of σταυρόν to σταυρωθέντα. It is argued that this modification results in a believable text. However, in this discussion such a proposal has been questioned on three fronts.

First, it has been argued that the proposed change results in a text that is actually less comprehensible, since it would require the risen Lord to be both part of the three person group leaving the tomb since he needs support (ὑποβοῦντας) from the other two figures, while simultaneously being the crucified one who follows himself. However, the text offers no clues either for the possibility that Jesus is no longer being supported by the other two figures, or that he has undergone some polymorphic metamorphosis. Hence it is more natural to understand a separation between the figure being supported and the figure that follows the three-person party leaving the tomb. The second observation was that the text of the *Gospel of Peter* contains other examples where inanimate objects are brought into motion, although the mechanism or cause is not explicitly described. The two examples in the extant portion of the text are the quaking of the earth when the body of the Lord is placed on

³⁹ M.R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota: A Collection of Thirteen Apocryphal Books and Fragments* (Cambridge: University Press, 1893) 160.

⁴⁰ James, *Apocrypha Anecdota*, English translation, 160; Greek text, 162.

⁴¹ L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish-Hamilton, 1953) 1.

⁴² Goodacre, <http://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2010/10/walking-talking-cross-or-walking.html> (Monday, October 18, 2010). Here there is an extensive list of comments broadly in favour of Goodacre’s proposal.

the ground (*Gos. Pet.* 6.21), and the automatic rolling away of the stone from the entrance of the tomb (*Gos. Pet.* 9.37). Thus the *Gospel of Peter* inhabits a strange world (at least to Post-Enlightenment minds) where divine power appears to animate otherwise inanimate objects. Thirdly, several examples of cross piety were presented from a range of texts that depict the cross as a salvific instrument, having a role in the harrowing of hell, or as being able to move or speak. This is perhaps the strongest piece of evidence for the case that the *Gospel of Peter* could envisage a scenario in which the cross became mobile and uttered speech. However, the case against the proposed conjectural emendation is cumulative, depending on all three factors outlined above.

So do crosses walk and talk? Well in the same word that was heard from the cross itself, the answer is ‘Yes’ – as long as that affirmation is understood to be within the textual world of certain ancient Christian writings, and also as forming part of the pious thought-world of the readers of such texts. In that context, a cross that could walk and talk was both conceivable and believable.